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NUCLEAR SHADOWS ON CONVENTIONAL CONFLICTS

by

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Dino Buzzati's strange and beautiful novel *Il Deserto dei Tartari*, usually known in English as *The Tartar Steppe*, is one of the most powerful, if not mysterious, literary creations of modern times. Published in 1945, it is the story of a newly commissioned lieutenant, in name Italian, as are all his brother officers, though none belong to any identifiable army, whose first posting is to a remote border fortress, Fort Bastiani. His journey to his posting takes him into an increasingly bleak and deserted region, and his arrival introduces him into equally dessicated company. The fort, it quickly dawns on him, is not a normal military posting. It is a sort of life sentence.

Stronger still, it is a life sentence without a point. The fort deters a threat that will never materialize. The great desert plateau that stretches away through the surrounding mountains in front of its outposts was once an invasion route. But no hostile forces had crossed it in the memory of living man—or, indeed, in the lifetimes of generations long dead. Sentries are changed meticulously, old and new guards relieved and mounted punctiliously at the detached positions, the flag raised and honored at dawn and sunset. But the enemy which justifies these precautions never materializes; indeed, he does not really exist.

That is the newcomer's instant impression. It is also the unspoken truth which underlies the life of the fort, sapping the will and energy of all who serve there. Yet there is another undercurrent, a half-terrifying, half-intoxicating belief that one day the enemy *will* appear again. It is that buried fear-and-hope which infects the officers sent to the fort—not all of them, but in the fort's value system the best of them—to decline postings away and to make their careers within its walls. Buzzati's hero is at first determined to leave at the earliest opportunity. But gradually he too is bitten by the fear-and-hope of the forgotten enemy's inappearance. He, too, declines a transfer when one is due him. He settles into the fort's routine, undergoes a progressive detachment from the life of the normal world behind the frontier, passes from youth and lieutenancy to majority and middle-age. Eventually, as retirement approaches, he sickens with a wasting illness. The first commander urges him to leave, but he refuses. Only when signs appear of the fear-and-hope's materialization—the return of the unnamed enemy to the desert of the Tartars below the fort's walls—does the colonel insist. Buzzati's hero is borne away on a litter to the normal world below the mountains, amid the clatter of the garrison's preparations for war. But whether the enemy has really come to attack the fortress, and whether the hero survives his illness or succumbs, we do not learn.

Now, at one level *The Tartar Steppe* is clearly an allegory of life, of the ordeal of the individual bound to an existence whose point he cannot understand, but escape from which seems an act of cowardice and may be a denial of life's hidden purpose. Catholic theologians would say that *Il Deserto dei Tartari* is a profoundly eschatalogical novel. And so it is.

But it is also an allegory of a different kind—if I can coin a phrase, an essay in strategic teleology. It may have been entirely coincidental that the novel was published in 1945. But, if so, it was strikingly fortuitous—apt with that intuition perhaps only great novelists have for the unperceived transportation of the world about them. For if forts and garrisons were symbolic of the way states had defended themselves against external threats from the beginning of time, then that particular year had an extraordinary symbolic importance. It was the year in which forts and garrisons lost their value as a means of ultimate defense, in which indeed the con-

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cept of ultimate defense—always a chimera—evaporated like morning mist under the heat of the desert sun.

As a result, *The Tartar Steppe* may be read by the strategically minded in two different ways, each autonomous, together highly complementary. In one way, Fort Bastiani and its garrison may be held to represent the institutions and personnel who manage the central strategic system, as we have come to call the major nuclear force. They, too, like Buzzati's hero, are chained to the service of a military confinement that will never be used—so at least their rational mind tells them. Buried beneath their reason, however, is the nagging fear that it might. And buried deeper still—at a level shared not only by them but by all citizens who belong to states which are nuclear powers—is the seductive, wicked flicker of hope that perhaps it might. To suggest that such a flicker never surfaces in the consciousness of the nuclear warriors is to assert that they are not human beings.

Let us not dwell on that feature of human psychology. The second way that *The Tartar Steppe* allegorizes the condition of the contemporary military establishment is in the ethos of the conventional forces of nuclear powers. For they, too, like the garrison of Fort Bastiani, are men denied a clear and apparent purpose in life. The existence of nuclear weapons has robbed them of their age-old role as the ultimate guarantors of life and liberty to their civilian fellows. The ultimate threat has changed and they are even less equipped than the nuclear warriors to oppose it. And when the threat presents itself in some diluted form—as a world war, or a peacekeeping mission—the ambient risk that their wholehearted engagement might elevate exerts a comparably limiting effect on their role. Deny it though they may, even to themselves, nuclear weapons have reduced the status of conventional warriors to that of the gendarme—an armed policeman whose freedom to deal in violence will always be constrained either by the doctrine of "minimum necessary force" or by the judgment of his political superiors that politics makes necessary an even less forceful response than that.

Hence—in part at least—the distortions imposed on the strategy and tactics of limited wars fought by the nuclear powers since 1945. "Limited war" is a concept which has suffered heavily at the hands of scholars. They have succeeded in demonstrating that the deliberate limitations apparently imposed on warfare in the past are usually explicable in terms which have little to do with human decision; incapacity operated far more often than judgments of inutility. But the military affluence enjoyed by the great powers during the 1950s and 1960s did endow them with the ability to choose how they would fight—when and if they did. And so we can objectively perceive, in Vietnam for example, conscious and chosen limitation of means and targeting at work. The result—the first shadow thrown by nuclear weapons on conventional warfare that I would identify—was, paradoxically, to intensify the cruelty of a war by its prolongation in time. No doubt it will be disputed that there never was any quick means to settle the Vietnam War. The early mobilization of its reserves by the United States, the immediate extension of the bombing campaign to Hanoi and Haiphong, the invasion of the North by ground or amphibious forces, might have had results quite other than victory. But it will probably not be disputed that such measures would have produced climactic results. In their absence, the war dragged on, permeating the physical and social environment of the Vietnamese with its effects: to mention but two, much of the countryside was depopulated and the population deracinated, while enormous areas of forest were ruined by cratering, metal fragmentation, and defoliation.

War, as Clausewitz proposes to us, has its own grammar but not its own logic. A second and reciprocal effect of military affluence in the nuclear world is that when states do impose limitations of time on the use they make of force, the level of violence exerted may be far greater than that intended. The intensity of the fighting in the strictly limited Falklands campaign surprised everyone, not least the immediate participants. Both sides were severely constrained by time—the Argentinians by the need to defeat the British task force before it was firmly lodged ashore, the British by the approach of the sub-Antarctic winter. The outcome was a frighteningly bitter and destructive series of small battles, which destroyed life and material on a prodigal scale. British ship losses and Argentinian casualties were far higher than had been expected or experience predicated. One

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explanation of these unanticipated phenomena is that the two elite fighting forces engaged— Argentinian air force and British parachutists—adopted a virtual kamikaze attitude to their missions, in an apparent and conscious attempt to escape a political or diplomatic restriction of their efforts which they knew impended.

If we include Israel within the nuclear power orbit, which given its ambiguous client relationship with the United States it is not inappropriate to do, we see the same "race against time" intensification of effort at work in its style of warfare. Israel, a beneficiary of modern military affluence par excellence, fights, of course, wars of national survival. But its national survival being measured in terms of the preservation of life as much as of retention of territory or *post bellum* advantage, firepower and material are expended by the Israel Defence Force with a prodigality limited only by supply—of which, as yet, there has been no shortage. Since Israel's opponents, and notably Syria, have recently come to share the fruits of military affluence, donated in its case by the Soviet Union, a conjunction of military styles results, the effect of which is to produce wars of fleeting duration and quite unparalleled destructiveness. Until 1982, accidents of geography determined that such destructiveness had little collateral effect on the region's civilian populations or productive areas; but that alienation may in the future not be counted upon.

Still, it would be perverse to argue that the shadow cast on the conventional warfare strategy of the nuclear powers, via their possession of such weapons, is black with malfeasance. So far no nuclear power has waged war directly with another, and I am simpleminded enough to think that the prudence induced by the possession of nuclear arms explains that. It might also be argued that the same prudence imposes a fairly long periodicity on such wars as they do fight: if we exclude the Korean War, responsibility for the precipitation of which remains obscure (though it was certainly not America's), the United States and the Soviet Union have each risked only one military expedition in the last 40 years. It is difficult to think of any other period of history in which the world's leading military powers committed their military forces to foreign war with such little frequency. Small campaigns of imperial conquest by Britain, France, and Russia dotted even the long peace after Waterloo, and in the succeeding hundred years, of course, during which America also rose to world power, all were at war, for colonial or great-power purposes, for quick, short intervals.

Nuclear weapons cast their shadow, however, in many directions, and not merely whither the interests of the great powers run. The postwar world has been a world of many wars. Some have been the proxy wars of the great powers, raged at each other or for some unilateral and local purpose through the campaigns of third parties. But third parties have done a great deal of fighting on their own account, and for a variety of names which can only with the greatest difficulty—if at all—be shown to fit within the strategy of East-West confrontation. Perhaps the simplest way to characterize many of these wars is in terms of local imperialisms coming to life again after the long ice-age of European colonialism. In the Indian subcontinent, in Southeast Asia, in Africa, in the Gulf, local hierarchies of race and religion, subordinated by the superimposition of white rule, are being thrashed out once more, in pursuit of claims and pretensions and often on battlefields familiar to the combatants before the Europeans arrived.

It would be simpleminded to expect that decolonization would have had a different outcome. But it can certainly be contended that it might not have had the outcome the successor states have undergone had the shadow of nuclear weapons not fallen over their world as well as ours. In the first place, the climate of strategic suspicion which the nuclear factor heightens (induces would be the wrong word) between the superpowers has made the arbitration of third-party disputes, particularly where the provision of peacekeeping forces would assist arbitration, a problem-fraught business. Peacekeeping in the heyday of great-power management of the world was never easy to arrange and was always heavily motivated by self-interest and mutual distrust. But it was, nevertheless, occasionally possible—as in Lebanon in 1860 or China in 1900—to arrange interventions in which all the powers were represented. No intervention including representatives of the United States and the Soviet Union has ever been staged. One consequence of the indirectness of superpower involvement has been the delegation of peacekeeping functions to the armed forces of countries lacking the stature or firmness of purpose to see a

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mission through a crisis. An excellent example of such infirmity is yielded by the Middle East crisis of May and June 1967 when the supervisory elements of the UN force were withdrawn by their governments at the prompting of Egypt.

Moreover, even when a force from a superpower *is* party to a peacekeeping mission—we are, in effect, discussing the United States—its freedom to execute its role is severely hampered by the nuclear factor, as we have just seen in Lebanon. The limitation on its effectiveness seems to operate as follows: concern for the sensitivities of its nuclear antagonist prevents the sponsoring power from securing the peace by disarming the local constituents (since that would be to replace local military power with its own); but domestic opinion will not accept casualties suffered in the course of what appears to be halfhearted and ineffective public action. Peacekeeping thereby is made merely palliative, securing at first a commission, not a cure of the situation it was intended to settle.

None of that might matter were the local forces engaged in third-party conflicts still, as they used to be, equipped with fourth- or fifth-class arms and materiel. But that is no longer the case—a function of the prevailing state of "military affluence" that has already been mentioned. It ought now to be described. Nuclear weapon systems, it is accepted, are exceptionally expensive to procure and require expensive and continuous modernization. The budgetary climate thus generated has allowed the manufacturers of conventional weapons—the cost inflation of which has not until recently been as steep and has certainly not attracted as much public attention—to collude with the conventional forces in providing improved equipment at steadily shortening intervals.

The product of this process has been an enormous flux of secondhand arms of high quality, available as gifts or for sale at bargain prices to states outside the East and West blocs. It is an important feature of this development that certain standard items, particularly ammunition, are less subject to the modernistic process, and so remain in production over several generations of equipment, meanwhile cheapening by the familiar "economy of scale" effect.

Local forces engaged in third-party conflicts are thereby enabled to inflict damage of an unparalleled and literally almost indescribable quality on each other and their environment. Nothing seen in newspaper photographs or on the television screen, for example, prepares a visitor for the extent of the devastation wrought in Beirut since 1975. Newsreels may suggest that the extent and degree of destruction equates to that in Belfast or in one of the blighted and abandoned districts of New York. Such an equation dissipates in the first minutes of a visit to the city. Along the Green Line, separating Christian from Moslem Beirut, the city is laid waste for block upon block. Indeed, in an area equivalent to that filled in New York by Madison, Lexington, and Park Avenues from Grand Central Station to 15 blocks northward, there are no inhabited buildings at all. The roads have been bulldozed clear of rubble and the walls of the buildings stand, but the floors and roofs have collapsed inward, leaving them open to the sky. This is the result not of shelling but of fires started in street-fighting. Indeed, the truly extraordinary feature of the damage is that almost all of it is the result of small-arms and infantry weapon exchanges. Every building in the devastated zone is pock-marked with bullet-strikes, only a few inches apart, while those buildings which have been the focus of particularly intense gun-battles have actually had their silhouettes altered by the weight of metal that has struck them. The Holiday Inn, Phoenicia, and Murr Tower hotels have each been struck by *millions* of rounds of small-calibre ammunition, which in Beirut is as easy to come by as confetti at a wedding and dispersed quite as casually.

Given the amounts of ammunition which have been sprayed about so prodigally, it is astonishing that civilian—and indeed military—casualties have not been higher. But they have been high enough—a widely accepted estimate is that 30,000 Lebanese have died since 1975, in a population of about three million, of whom the majority have been killed by their fellow citizens—while, in the process, Lebanon has become totally and perhaps irreversibly militarized. Every Lebanese male of military age appears to possess a gun; most have done service in the communal militias formed to substantiate the communities' political claims and defend their zones of residence. None of this, of course, goes to make an argument that "military affluence" has *caused* the Lebanese problem. But military affluence has both

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helped to make the problem what it is today and ensured that it is almost wholly resistant to solution.

This military affluence, though particularly apparent in its effects in Lebanon, has also marked the conflicts of states elsewhere in the Middle East, in Asia, and in Africa. The war currently raging the Gulf between Iraq and Iran appears to be one of the deadliest of the last 40 years. It is commonly estimated that between 100,000 and 300,000 lives have already been lost in its course. What is so extraordinary is that neither combatant is the producer of any military materiel of any sort, and each has been or is in severe financial straits. So plentiful and cheap, however, have primary military goods become in today's world that neither has the least difficulty in acquiring all it needs. Even if Iraq is the beneficiary of Russian largesse in this account, Russia is able to supply the want only because ammunition and everyday munitions are now commodities of overproduction.

We may expect this strange and deplorable trend to continue. A consequence of decolonization has been not merely the emergence of large numbers of new sovereignties—over a hundred since 1945—but also of sovereign armed forces, all more or less equipped as time passes. This trend will diverge further from the path taken by the conventional armed forces of the superpowers' world, which, as we have seen, find it increasingly difficult to sustain their credibility and self-image now that they are denied their historic role of acting as ultimate protectors of the nation.

Almost the last of the shadows cast by nuclear weapons which ought to be mentioned, however, connects with recent attempts to return a decisive role to the conventional armed forces of nuclear powers. The origins of that attempt were entirely admirable. It had long been a cause of concern, both in Western Europe and in Washington, that the forces required for the effective defense of NATO's Central Front in Germany have been denied because of over-reliance on the threat to employ nuclear weapons should the front ever be broken by conventional attack. Yet means to improve the defense to match the menace offered—huge Warsaw Pact numbers—carried too high a political and financial price. It was with interest, even excitement, therefore, that in the late 1970s politicians and commanders began to listen to reports from defense technologists and analysts that a new array of equipment would allow the Central [illegible] be defended without either an unbearable increase in financial cost or a heavier manpower commitment.

The equipment promised—some of it already existed in prototype—performed three main functions: it very much improved surveillance, target acquisition, and accuracy of weapon delivery over both long and short distances; it extended the range at which enemy targets could be engaged; and it sharply increased the damage which could be inflicted by conventional warheads and other munitions. As a result, it was possible to glimpse a scenario in which, were a Warsaw Pact tank army to attempt the penetration of the Central Front, its echelons would be identified and engaged at great distances from the point of attack while the leading elements were deflected or halted by accurate point defense. These measures, together with the concomitant destruction of the hostile infrastructure—airfields, depots, pipelines, and communication chokepoints—promised to make conventional defense autonomous, and to free the NATO command structure of its fears that halting a Warsaw Pact breakthrough must entail recourse to nuclear weapons—or, alternatively, surrender.

The new equipment array was therefore to be welcomed. Or was it? Doubts about the desirability of strengthening so dramatically NATO's conventional capabilities arose quite quickly and from two separate and opposed sources. Europeans, particularly the Germans, who had always opposed recourse to nuclear weapons as a means of defending their soil, now decided that they feared the dissociation of nuclear weapons from European defense perhaps as much; equally, they disliked the prospect of a highly destructive war being fought on their soil with conventional weapons. At the same time, moderates among strategic analysts began to be alarmed by what looked like a revival of bellicosity among some of the strongest supporters of the new "defensive" weapons. One of the attractions, it appeared, of conventional weapons with high accuracy and payload was that they might actually replicate in their effects those of low-yield nuclear weapons. The prospect therefore presented itself, to some at least, of waging a war in Central Europe which NATO might actually *win*, without having recourse to

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nuclear weapons at any stage.

Needless to say, such a prospect could not be concealed from the Warsaw Pact, which, it might be expected, would naturally respond by modernizing its own conventional equipment array along similar lines. An undesired outcome of NATO's improved defensive strategy might therefore be to give another twist to the screw of escalation, by threatening the continent with a large-scale conventional war between East and West that might result in destruction equivalent to that caused by a small-scale nuclear war.

From the contradictions of modern weapons policy it might thus appear that there is no escape, particularly if improvements in conventional arms threaten to transform them into the equivalents of some forms of nuclear weapons. But to say that is to be too primitive. The objection to many of the new forms of conventional weapons is that they are too *offensive* in character—designed to seek enemy targets deep within his territory and destroy them by "area" effect. One unexploited feature of the climate of military affluence is that purely defensive weapons might now be designed and procured quite cheaply. This is not the place to argue at length the case for field fortifications. But it is certainly true that—without consolidating the boundary between East and West (a strong and understandable German concern), without dedicating much productive land to military use, without interfering with free communications in any direction, without pre-emplacing armies or other volatile munitions—it should now be possible to engineer and landscape the eastern border region of Western Germany so as to make it impossible to penetrate by military attack.

To adopt such a strategic policy, desirable as I think it, would not be to solve all the world's military problems. The great scandal of army supply to the Third World would remain—in the view of many, a real scandal crying to heaven for a just solution far louder than the potential scandal of nuclear war. But to settle the long instability which has gripped Europe since 1945 would be to clear the decks between the two sides for a genuine effort at arms control. It would be odd if, after all, Dino Buzzati's vision was incorrect and border fortifications still had their role to play in regulating peace between nations.

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Elite B-1B thunders into air arsenal over Texas

This is one in a series of articles on the future of U.S. weaponry.

By William S. Gray
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

ABILENE, Texas — The "big country" of Texas thundered with history Saturday as the world's most advanced bomber, the B-1B, slashed through cloudless skies to land at Dyess Air Force Base and enter operational service.

Gen. Bennie L. Davis, commander-in-chief of the Strategic Air Command piloted the sleek bomber from Edwards Air Force Base in California, to bring to Texas and SAC a long-delayed addition to the triad of U.S. nuclear-deterrent forces.

President Carter canceled the B-1 bomber program, but it was restored by President Reagan as part of a two-step "bomber modernization program" that will be completed when a supersecret advanced technology "Stealth" bomber becomes operational in the early 1990s.

"The flight was super, this plane flys like a fighter," a beaming Gen. Davis said shortly after clambering down the ramp under the plane's belly.

Indeed, the B-1 performed like a fighter as it roared over a crowd estimated at 45,000 and turned sharply toward the flat-topped mesquite covered hills surrounding the base.

Army General John W. Vessey, Jr., chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, read a congratulatory message to the Air Force and the people of Abilene from Mr. Reagan.

"It is well known that the people of Abilene and the 'big country' of West Texas have always been solid supporters of our nation's defense," Mr. Reagan said. "You are as much contributors to world peace as those men and women who serve in uniform."

Abilene, with a population of about 100,000, buzzed with excitement over the arrival of the first new heavy strategic bomber to reach SAC in 30 years. Banner newspaper headlines welcomed the B-1 and the town was festooned with American flags and B-1 posters. Soft drinks were served in B-1 bomber cups at concession stands along the 12,000 foot runway.

The plane that arrived Saturday — B-1B No. 1 — was aptly named "The Star of Abilene," but it wasn't the aircraft that had been scheduled for the flight.

Plans were for the second production bomber — B-1B No. 2 — to be the first to enter SAC, with plane number one remaining at Edwards

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